

The value of volunteering

Giving your time to other people or causes can help make the world a better place – it could also improve your life, writes **LYNN ELSEY**.

Volunteering is renowned for helping improve the lives and circumstances of others. It also “creates and sustains bonds of trust, societal cohesion and helps to forge a common sense of identity and destiny”, according to the United Nations *2011 State of the World's Volunteerism Report*.

Along with helping improve the world, doing volunteer work can also benefit the person who is giving their time.

According to Jacquelyn Hole, executive director for communications and strategy at the NSW Centre for Volunteering, a meta-study published in the *British Medical Journal* in 2008 concluded that “volunteering has a salubrious effect on volunteers, including a decrease in depression, stress and hospitalisation. Volunteers have better health, are more fit and resilient and live longer lives than those who don’t.”

Volunteering offers a chance to support a cause you feel strongly about, make a difference to the lives of others, develop new skills, build confidence and take a break from an internal work environment.

It also helps the economy. According to Jacquelyn Hole, volunteering is more valuable to the Australian economy than mining or tourism. In 2016, nearly 44 per cent of Australians did volunteer work, averaging 2.5 hours a week.

Employers have also recognised the benefits of service. Many Australian companies and firms now actively encourage and support opportunities for staff, including nominating time out of the office for volunteer work as part of employee benefits packages.

Health benefits

If you are already feeling stretched by work and personal commitments, taking on additional responsibilities might sound counterintuitive. But the evidence indicates otherwise.

It turns out that people who volunteer are happier and healthier than those who don’t. A number of studies and

reports have identified a range of personal benefits from volunteering. These include showing that people who regularly volunteer have higher levels of mental wellbeing than those who don’t (*British Medical Journal*, Jan 2016), are less likely to develop hypertension (*Psychology and Aging*, June 2013) and experience greater happiness, life satisfaction, self esteem, a sense of control over their life and physical health (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001).

Where to start

Most large and many smaller legal firms have pro bono programs, which is an obvious option to consider. Other organisations have internally-sponsored volunteering programs in place, which are other convenient places to look for opportunities.

In an effort to increase the amount and quality of pro bono work, the Australian Pro Bono Centre initiated a target for each lawyer to complete 35 hours pro bono legal work a year (see August *LSJ*). The organisation provides a number of pro bono opportunities, including positions that range from helping out in the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre to assisting with consumer, credit and debt services.

If you are interested in trying something outside the legal industry, the Volunteering Australia website is a good place to start. It offers an array of useful information, from general suggestions on how to locate positions to specific details related to undertaking a role. Your local council or community centre are also good places to consider, or look into an organisation that focuses on a cause of personal interest, such as animal welfare or children’s health.

Before you undertake extracurricular volunteering, don’t forget to consider additional stress the role might add to your life and how you will manage the added commitment, responsibility and emotional challenges before deciding to take on a role. **LSJ**

HIIT your stress away



High-intensity exercise can strengthen mind and body, writes **KATE ALLMAN**.

Two of your New Year's resolutions for 2017 might be to stress less and exercise more, but did you know doing one could lead to the other?

Organisations such as Exercise and Sports Science Australia, beyondblue and Anxiety Treatment Australia have long vouched for physical exercise as a simple and effective way to reduce stress. However, scientific studies have shown there is a neurochemical basis behind these claims. A 2013 study in *The Journal of Neuroscience* found that exercise can train a person's brain to dampen or block the hippocampus (the brain's hormone control centre) from releasing stress-inducing hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol.

In the same way that physical training can make your body adapt to grow faster or stronger, it seems that exercise can train your brain to be better at handling mental stress. So next time you're under pressure at work, your brain will be able to block those pesky stress hormones, allowing you to remain calm and think logically.

According to researchers at the University of Missouri-Colombia, it is high-intensity interval training, or HIIT, that offers the greatest benefits in reducing stress and anxiety. The researchers measured the anxiety levels of people after exercise and found that those who exercised at high intensity experienced the sharpest decline in stress.

National Development Manager at Fitness First Adrian Holdsworth believes this may be because HIIT requires total focus of the mind and body.

"When you're pushing your body to the limit, you need to focus entirely on the task at hand," says Holdsworth. "This can be a very effective distraction from your work or family issues."

"It is well reported that exercise can improve mood, concentration and sleep. For many people it is an essential ingredient to help them meet the demands of daily life."

Exercise also stimulates the production of endorphins, reduces your perception of pain and makes you feel happy and energised. It therefore seems unsurprising that the 2011 Mental Health Survey and Incidence Study of more than 7,000 adults in The Netherlands found that regular exercise reduced the risk of developing a mood or anxiety disorder, even allowing for socioeconomic factors and physical illnesses.

With 55 per cent of solicitors in NSW reporting having experienced depression, according to a 2011 University of Sydney study, high-intensity exercise can provide a natural way for lawyers to lower their stress levels that can lead to anxiety and depression. And the best news? You only need half an hour to do it.

Here's a 30-minute high-intensity workout requiring no props or equipment that Holdsworth recommends for busy lawyers to squeeze into their work day. **LSJ**

Bodyweight HIIT workout (30 minutes)

Warm up:

45 seconds per exercise, low intensity

- Bodyweight squats
- Pushups on knees alternate hands forward
- Lateral lunge with reach
- Spiderman lunges

Workout:

Do each exercise for 20 seconds at maximum intensity, followed by a 10 second rest.

Repeat for two minutes per exercise. Continue until you have been through the entire circuit twice. Your heart rate should be almost at maximum and you'll be puffing hard by the end of it.

- Jump squats
- Mountain climbers
- Ice skater lunges
- Bodyweight sit-through
- Plyometric lunges
- Up/down plank

Fitness First is a Member Connexions partner of the Law Society of NSW.



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